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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: ALMATY NOTES, SEPTEMBER 15-26, 2008

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¶1. (U) The "Almaty Notes" series is intended to maintain focus on developments in civil society, the media, and the opposition in Kazakhstan's "southern capital" following the move of the Embassy to Astana.

DEMONSTRATION IN SUPPORT OF THE KAZAKH LANGUAGE

¶2. (U) On September 21 in Almaty, several Kazakh nationalist organizations, together with other NGOs and representatives of three leading opposition parties -- Azat, the National Social Democratic Party (OSDP), and Alga -- participated in a demonstration aimed at pressing the government to do more to promote the Kazakh language. Well-known poet and ex-parliamentarian Mukhtar Shakhanov and his NGO Memlekettik Tili (i.e., "State Language") were the driving force behind the event. An estimated 1000 to 3000 people attended the rally, which was sanctioned by the authorities.

¶3. (SBU) All the speeches to the crowd were delivered in Kazakh -- which made it readily apparent that not all the speakers were themselves proficient in the language. OSDP deputy chairman Amirzhan Kosanov demonstrated the strongest Kazakh language skills among the opposition leaders. Azat leader Bulat Abilov managed to muster only brief remarks, while Shanyrak movement head (and former Alga chairman) Asylbek Kozhakhmetov could barely get out a word of Kazakh. (NOTE: Current Alga head Vladimir Kozlov did not attend the demonstration. Kozlov, an ethnic Russian, does not speak any Kazakh. END NOTE.) They and other speakers nevertheless stressed that Kazakh should be used more in the public life of the country, including by the government. There was agreement that the government should pass a law making knowledge of Kazakh obligatory for all citizens. Shakhanov criticized the government's efforts to promote tri-lingualism -- i.e., proficiency in Kazakh, Russian, and English -- as inhibiting the development of the Kazakh language. Several speakers called for renaming Kazakhstan the "Kazakh Republic."

¶4. (SBU) A representative from the Almaty mayor's office also delivered remarks -- though they were largely anodyne. Other city officials attended but did not speak. They reportedly told NGO activist Bakhytzhan Toregozhina that they were at the demonstration as private citizens, rather than in their official capacity. (COMMENT: Some in the opposition camp complained that the mayor's office supported the demonstration to divert the attention of the public away from economic problems -- but the motivations for the

participation of the opposition leaders, all of whose parties are non-nationalist, are perhaps equally suspect. END COMMENT.)

NGO DENIED REGISTRATION YET AGAIN

15. (U) For the third time, the Society of Young Professionals has been denied registration at the national level, its head, Nurul Rakhimbek, told journalists on September 22. The Society is registered in Almaty, but wants national-level registration so that it can establish offices in other regions. Rakhimbek said that the Ministry of Justice denied the organization's third attempt to register because of alleged errors in the Kazakh-language version of its application. "They said there were errors, but did not specify what they were," claimed the Society's executive director, Olesya Khalabuzar. The organization maintains that the real reason for its registration problems is that the government does not approve of its work, which is largely focused on community organizing.

FARE INCREASES DEMANDED FOR PUBLIC TRANSIT

16. (U) On September 22, several privately-owned transit companies in Almaty went on strike, suspending bus services for a day. The companies demanded the government approve fare increases and end fare discounts, complaining that their costs had increased, largely because of rising fuel prices. Over 800 buses failed to complete their routes. The Almaty mayor's office held an urgent meeting with the companies, offering 100 million tenge (approximately \$830,000) in immediate assistance and promising to hold public hearings on bus fares. The city government plans to establish three municipal transit companies to compete with the private companies.

CRIME SUSPECT JUMPS FROM POLICE STATION WINDOW

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17. (U) The Interior Ministry reported in a September 18 press release that a suspect being interrogated at an Almaty police station hit an investigator and then jumped out a fifth floor window. The suspect died two hours later in the hospital. The individual had been detained on suspicions that he had stolen a briefcase out of an automobile.

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